

Positional Goods and Social Benefits: A Plea for Altruism

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Economists admire Adam Smith's metaphor of the agent who manufactures objects for private benefit and thereby produces social benefits, as if by an Invisible Hand; for those benefits are not part of the self-interested intentions or motivations of either party to a transaction.¹ Contemporary educational transactions mimic Smith's notion, with parents and students as consumers and the student pursuing educational success for positional goods. On the analogy, teaching outcomes are subject to an "Invisible Hand" creating unintended social benefits through the encounters which develop the student's individual talents, virtues and knowledge, manifest in the socio-economic fabric.² For a democratic capitalist society, of course, the pursuit of positional goods through education is a necessary not a contingent feature, justified by the principle of freedom. However, the educational emphasis given to that pursuit diminishes education as of intrinsic worth, gives a constrained view of human flourishing, and saps the moral content from the education of the whole person. This Invisible Hand delivers only *weak* social benefits, as the outcomes are random, uncertain, and limited, dependent on the students' educational encounters, motivations and life choices.

Indeed, whether students develop concern for the welfare of others rather than themselves, whether they develop any *altruistic* motivation, is distinct if not directly hostile to the drive for positional goods. Smith presumed moral rectitude in manufacturers, yet social benefits do not inevitably accrue, exemplified by Ralph Nader's 1963 book *Unsafe at Any Speed*.³ Educators likewise presumably do not *intend* such educational dis-benefits as student bullies, cheats, dropouts or failures. However simplistic this analogy of the Invisible Hand is for educational transactions, it opens up a different avenue into education and civil society, distinct from traditional approaches to moral and character education. For in the contemporary socio-economic framework one fundamental challenge

for the educator is to accept the legitimacy of student and parent motivation for positional goods and simultaneously bring strong social (and moral) benefits within the educator's intentions and anticipated outcomes.

In this article, I first briefly describe the influence of the quest for positional goods on student perceptions and behaviors in contemporary educational practice and its outcomes. Second, I describe altruism as a social benefit, picking out five main features of the altruist and altruistic acts, and, pointing out that altruistic motivation is differently interpreted from distinctive ethical perspectives, focus on a utilitarian example. Third, I articulate the educational challenge through two central questions: first, on the teacher's responsibility, and second, on three conditions for educational practice, which open up an agenda of questions on justice, prejudice, and the epistemic life of groups in classrooms. The development of altruistic motivation can be directed intentionally at socially beneficial consequences, not abandoned to the aleatory Invisible Hand.

THE DOMINANCE OF POSITIONAL GOODS

Public policy emphasizes the search for positional goods, i.e., to “develop the knowledge, skills and habits of the productive citizen.” The following outcomes illustrate some of its effects.

First, it works – for many. Positional goods in a capitalist society are necessarily unevenly distributed.⁴ “For example, in 2017 the median earnings of young adults with a master's or higher degree (\$65,000) were 26 percent higher than those of young adults with a bachelor's degree (\$51,800), and the median earnings of young adults with a bachelor's degree were 62 percent higher than those of young adult high school completers (\$32,000).⁵ Non-completers are disproportionately African-American. They may be regarded as school failures, but schools have failed them.

Second, even when schools aim at social as opposed to individual benefits, programs can fail. Citizenship Education, for instance, encourages voting, but it is a paradigm example of a *weak* social benefit. In 2016 only 42 percent of the

18-29 demographic voted, compared to 59 percent of those citizens “eligible to vote” who did vote, notwithstanding the many complexities in accounting for non-voters.⁶ Citizenship Education thus has yet to yield a full-blooded sense of a democratic community when more than half of this young demographic fail to undertake its most basic task.

Third, the influence of a school’s commitment to positional goods lurks in two systemic moral problems within educational practice, obviously in cheating but less so in bullying. Cheating is a major issue for schools and educators, indicating a student’s moral failure in claiming knowledge.⁷ In 2011, one study reported that “more than half of teenagers say they have cheated on a test during the last year.”⁸ Yet most students know that cheating is wrong, and some gifted and talented students acknowledge that they really did not need to cheat but if others do, given the competition for positional goods, it is irrational not to follow suit in the mores of school society.⁹

Bullying is an immoral quest for personal power, itself a positional good. It often emerges from the classroom experience of a non-cooperative but competitive environment.¹⁰ Children perceive bullying as a more severe problem than adults, yielding fear and loneliness.¹¹ Studies show a quarter of children in schools at some point are victims, but it is prevalent in early adolescence.¹² Two matters are of related moral concern, namely the attitudes of bystanders and the reactions of the bullied. First, bystanders provide further humiliation for the victim and encouragement for the bully and at the same time they are reluctant to intervene.¹³ Second, in almost all cases of school shootings studied over 30 years, perpetrators had been bullied and then targeted their aggressors, as at Columbine High School. Social-psychological explanations apart, bullying exemplifies the power dynamics present within the school as an institution, in a classroom or, say, in a dinner line.¹⁴

Schools and teachers presumably promote neither cheating nor bullying. Yet, they are social dis-benefits, the *unintended* consequences of educational practices, illustrative of competition for status.¹⁵ The educational challenge then becomes how to maximize social benefits as a means to diminishing these and other dis-benefits. This presents a cluster of familiar problems around school

failure, the relationships between moral education and the school ethos, cheating and testing, ignorance of significant data and, significantly, whether teachers acknowledge any responsibility. Altruism and altruistic motivation, it will now be argued, are social benefits that can come within both the intentions and responsibilities of the teacher, with socially beneficial consequences.¹⁶

SOCIAL BENEFIT, ALTRUISM, AND ALTRUISTIC MOTIVATION

Formally, a social benefit is any outcome of the actions of an individual, a group or an institution that either a) does no social or economic harm, and/or b) removes a source of harm, and/or c) realizes public goods. A social benefit may accrue without being intended: First, (a) actions which avoid social and economic harm are socially beneficial because, for instance, they stabilize a valued public good, e.g., volunteers clearing trash from a waterway; second, actions which remove a source of harm, (b) e.g., when a company cleans up a polluted field, are beneficial to the local constituency affected by the pollution, and, third, actions which realize a public good, (c) e.g., law and order, government sponsored civil and political anti-smoking campaigns, or groups with role responsibilities (e.g., Human Rights Watch). Each is contributory to life in civil society.

Any social benefit for the public good, however, is one where one person's consumption of *Q* does not detract from another's *and* where none can be excluded from *Q*.¹⁵ Public parks, for instance, are open to all. In education, *A*'s knowledge ("consumption") of *X* does not detract from *B* knowing *X*, but children can be excluded from knowledge of *X*, e.g. through incompetent teaching. But while public goods are by definition social benefits, not all social benefits might be described as *public* goods, as in (b) above: Only specific groups may be the beneficiaries (parking spaces for the handicapped). What economists label as the "public goods problem" usually centers on the complexities of government activity, particularly questions about educational vouchers and charter schools, outside consideration here.

One public good and social benefit for civil society is individual (or

group) altruism with the motivation implied, as a part of human flourishing or individual well-being for both agent(s) and recipient(s). That requires examining first the altruist and altruistic acts, and second altruistic motivation.

The altruist and altruistic acts

First, the altruist makes three altruistic judgments, on Martha Nussbaum's account: a) he or she believes that the misfortunes of others are serious, b) that these others have not brought this misfortune on themselves, and c) that they are themselves important parts of one's own scheme of ends and goals. The conjunction of these beliefs she regards as very likely to lead to action addressing the suffering, which is "a quasi-ethical achievement: namely, it involves valuing another person as part of one's own circle of concern."¹⁷ Richard Kraut also emphasizes that the altruist must have "a correct understanding of well-being" for the acts to be fully admirable.¹⁸

Second, the altruist must act; altruism is "*behavior* undertaken deliberately to help someone other than the agent *for that other individual's sake*."¹⁹ Outcomes matter: Compassion, empathy, or contemplating the plight of the starving, is not enough. Indeed, compassion and empathy are only contingently related to altruistic acts. Actions based on Nussbaum's judgment criteria are enough, and thus an altruistic act has to be based in informed reason underpinned by an ethical viewpoint.

Third, altruistic acts are not located within the prescriptions of a role. No *prescribed* or *conventional* role performance, whether that of a lawyer, teacher or parent, is altruistic. *Pro-bono* picks out precisely the altruism of a lawyer: it goes beyond role expectations. The teacher who spends weekends counselling the sick parents of a troubled child is not required to do so by contract. Such a teacher may see herself expanding or redefining her role and her responsibilities by being altruistic. Notwithstanding the Prodigal Son's protestations about his unworthiness as a son and appeals to his father's altruism, the father sees himself still in the parental role. Thus, altruism describes what goes beyond moral expectations or activities express or implicit in a conventional context

of expectations or an employment contract.

Fourth, who deserves our altruistic concerns? Nussbaum focusses on those with serious misfortunes not caused by the deserving individual. Such people may also, to repeat Nussbaum, be objects of need, resentment and anger. If altruism demands outcomes, then altruistic choices have to be weighed against other responsibilities, and altruistic interventions must be realistic. The notion of altruism-desert, however, introduces a *justive* criterion which would need much more attention than I can give to it here. Deserving children in schools and classrooms make special demands in that many of their misfortunes, homelessness, dysfunctional families and so on are not their responsibility in ways that drug addicts or adult alcoholics may not be. Joshua Greene's contrast of Us and Them suggests that altruism-desert may well be more perspicuous to those whom we recognize as Us, e.g., family, maybe other kids on the block, even perhaps our class.²⁰

Finally, if altruism is supererogatory, i.e., beyond the call of duty, it is significant to notice the underpinning ethical viewpoint leading to altruism to which I have referred. Duty evokes a Kantian perspective. But clearly, an Aristotelian or a Utilitarian would view an altruistic act differently, not as a matter of duty, to which I will return. In addition, Michael Hand argues that any breach of morality conceptually demands penalties for that breach: but no punishment can be meted out to those who are not altruistic, which might be significant for the educational development of altruistic motivation.²¹

Altruistic motivation

Accounts of altruism distinguish between the life-style self-sacrificial altruism of the saint, motivated presumably by service to God, and described by Kraut as "pure" altruism. That is distinct from what I label "mundane" altruism. Reasons are different from motives. Here motives are usually mixed. While a mundane altruist is doing good for others, relieving their suffering and thereby promoting a social benefit, these acts may yield for individuals a sense of well-being and self-identity. Altruistic motivation does not demand selfless-

ness: an altruist may get satisfaction from the moral applause of others for what is done, though the primary motivation must be to address the suffering and deliver appropriate outcomes.

However, the motivations of such a benefactor not only vary in intensity, but vary in terms of rationale and purpose, depending on ethical grounding. One could argue that an Aristotelian, for instance, is interested in altruistic acts to inform his or her sense of personal virtue. A religious couple who adopt orphan children can have mixed motives, but their altruism lies in their sense of religious obligation. However, a striking alternative is provided by Peter Singer's account of "effective" altruism, which displays a pragmatic and consequentialist approach to altruistic acts.²² Effective altruism is a commitment to 'doing the most good you can' based on careful appreciation of need and desert, without compassion being the underpinning motive. In Singer's description, the "effective" altruist works out personal needs, limits them, and then typically donates a high proportion of income to charities, maximizing social benefit from his or her actions. Singer's effective altruists thus deny that their actions are sacrificial or egoistic, but straightforward responses embodying the "deep pragmatism" of Joshua Greene's utilitarianism.²³ For Singer's effective altruists, each should count for one and none for more than one, him or herself included. Looking deliberately toward individual or social needs within known groups, he suggests, is much more likely to bring about social benefit than a warm glow of empathy.

These other-regarding acts and motivations confront the inherent selfishness implicit in the search for positional goods. Altruistic motivation as a concern for others thus stands in formal contrast, even conflict, with the egoistic motivation dominating the search for positional goods.

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE: ALTRUISM AND TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY

Nussbaum's description of the educational challenge of altruism is how "to broaden, educate, and stabilize elements of concern *that are already there* – and in particular how to build a stable and truly ethical concern for

persons, who are also objects of need, resentment and anger.”²⁴ But what is meant by “already there”? Joshua Greene, mentioned above, recently argued that cooperation between those we recognize as “Us” is evolutionary, supported by brain research: The tragedy of Commonsense Morality is “Us”; our inability to cooperate with “Them.”²⁵ Nel Noddings finds a naturalistic base in the maternal factor.²⁶ C. Donald Batson’s lifetime of research is directed at disproving universal egoism, as a catch-all explanation for human motivation, by working with an empathy-altruism hypothesis, namely that people act – naturally – out of concern for others and later an empathy-joy hypothesis that individuals experience pleasure at seeing the other’s relief.²⁷ “What is already there” could refer to a naturalistic and/or an ethical perspective, seen as an altruistic disposition.

Recognizing these differences, we need to get at Nussbaum’s stability within altruistic motivation, the *feeling* of concern which will arise from the cognitive appreciation that the other is experiencing some form of distress, *and* thereby deserves help, not indifference as with the bystander or exploitation as with the bully. To repeat. The development of altruistic motivation must, whatever is “already there,” focus on information, reason and judgment. Empathetic responses to human distress are stimuli to altruistic motivation and informed acts based on judgment, but not co-extensive with it. Two questions arise: Is the development of altruistic motivation the teacher’s responsibility? What conditions for educational practice might support altruistic motivation?

First, on the teacher’s responsibility. John Austin’s formulation in “A Plea for Excuses” helps tackle questions of a teacher or a school’s responsibility for socially beneficial outcomes. Actions either excused or justified in a particular way and not in others throw light on standards of conduct, he writes, so we can only understand responses to these questions in the light of existing school and teacher standards in the limits, range and extent of responsibility. In “moral or practical affairs, we can know the facts and yet look at them mistakenly or perversely, or not fully realize or appreciate something, or even be under a total misconception.”²⁸ Thus, we can excuse ourselves by:

a) acknowledging a responsibility but denying that the situation was bad; or

b) accepting that the situation is bad, but not accept any responsibility for it.

In a) teachers might acknowledge responsibility for girls not doing more STEM subjects, but deny that it is bad, by pointing to increased attainments and cracks in the glass ceiling. Yet teachers might also know the data on bullying or cheating but look at them perversely or mistakenly, in Austin's phrase. They might ignore a bullying incident, or not "fully appreciate" the extent of psychological damage created by bullying.

In b) teachers might acknowledge that the situation is bad but deny responsibility. The denial can be formulated in various ways. Some children just "don't want to learn." They "have no confidence and low self-esteem." Others "choose ignorance" and oppose the system through disruption. Children, bullies in particular, can be viewed as products of poor parenting or a variety of socio-psychological explanations which are outside the teacher or the school's ability to control. Cheats are created through parental pressures, but children know the rules of the honor code. Schools may deny responsibility for the homelessness of two and a half million children in America, even though most of these children jostle from school to school unable to establish consistent relationships.²⁹

Without further ethical argument, the claim here is that schools and teachers should identify and support cases of altruism-desert *and* stimulate altruistic motivation in children. This can be seen in two interactive dimensions: the *internal* responsibility within a classroom or school, and the *external* responsibility to parents or to a community. A child diagnosed with cancer, let us assume, is a paradigm example of altruism-desert: he or she will attract all manner of internal altruistic acts by teachers and by students. However, the quest for positional goods will often "crowd out" the development of altruistic motivation, as when a child protests at being asked to help a classmate with work. The internal responsibility may then fall heavily on group work driven by mutual help, not competition, which will complicate the motivation being enhanced.

The external responsibility provides major challenges. In many cases,

it may take the form of parental education: a London school provides classes in Arabic for Muslim mothers whose mother tongue is English so that they can read the Koran. But it is those parents of children who do not have the resources, morally, emotionally or practically to relieve their children's distress who are thereby deserving of altruism. Joseph Johnson, Texas Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children, provides an excellent assessment of Austin's, b) an excuse he would not accept:

Perhaps the school cannot handle any more responsibilities. On the other hand, school staff contend that they truly can make a difference ... Perhaps it is primarily a change in attitude that is required. Perhaps school staff can ensure that today's homeless children will not be tomorrow's homeless parents. Perhaps there truly is not a choice.³⁰

Of course, there is a choice, and a distinction. First, Johnson is appealing to institutional and individual altruism. He is advocating acceptance of *external* responsibility for the well-being of homeless children *outside* the school's classrooms, by both the institution and its teachers, going well beyond their conventional responsibilities in, say, seeking contact with parents. But, how far should the school or the teacher's responsibility extend outside the environs of the institution, as it will create tensions between role responsibility determined by the authorities and altruism? Second, that *external* responsibility differs from the *internal* responsibility of the classroom teacher that addresses how altruistic motivation may be stimulated within schools and classrooms with social benefit in mind, while the *internal* is an outreach of formal authority.

SOME CONDITIONS FOR ALTRUISTIC MOTIVATION IN CLASSROOMS

What then might be some conditions for the internal responsibilities of the classroom teacher? Several conditions, among many, will matter: a) no "crowding out" of altruism by the quest for positional goods; b) the development of a student's self-identity as an altruist, a person with concern for the suffering of others; c) opportunities for altruistic acts, both in the internal and the external

frameworks; d) understanding that the rewards are intrinsic; and e) a classroom community in which all develop a sense of a civil society community for those with serious misfortunes and that outcomes are constructed to mitigate those misfortunes. One central condition among these will be classroom conversation.

Kenneth Strike notes that “it requires a civic conversation that seeks common ground more than victory and a concomitant willingness to transform one’s view so as to sustain the commons.”³¹ Paul Grice articulated a “cooperative principle” for conversations characterized by quantity, quality, relation and manner.³² Quantity demands using information not more than necessary for the conversation. Quality demands not stating beliefs you know to be false (no devil’s advocates) or for which you lack evidence. Relation is about relevance to the conversation. In manner, the avoidance of obscurity, ambiguity, and be brief and orderly. Grant argues that such classroom dialog and critical inquiry precisely cultivates the ethical characteristics needed to participate in the deliberations of a democracy, especially in the complex decisions to be made on altruism-desert.³³ Understanding through reason has to be hammered out if beliefs are to be tested and to become authentic.³⁴

Second, therefore, such conversation must contain live controversies on altruism-desert, provoking disagreement. That will present: a) problems of privacy for discussion on the internal - individual students’ misfortunes especially issues of blame, responsibility and conflict of purpose, possibly even mental health; and b) formal hypothetical questions to develop understanding, e.g., should the father have helped the Prodigal Son? Was it fair to the other son? There are also: c) special cases, contributions to funds for a child with cancer generating questions on individual or public responsibility for healthcare; and d) issues of desert in terms of global responsibilities. But, to repeat, desert is a matter of justice and that can be realized within a strong enough community, within a classroom, where altruistic support is often needed and deserved.

Third, Strike’s reference to transforming viewpoints allude to implicit or explicit prejudices held by children, and dialogue and conversation should open up individual and group prejudice.³⁵ In a classroom, students can shoulder epistemic responsibility, as a group, for both implicit and explicit prejudice, which elicit questions of culpability and blame.³⁶ The existence of such prejudices,

apparent as much in schools as in civil society, puts demands on the institution of the school, not merely for ameliorative action where needed. Deliberation and action on altruism can create individual and collective ethical beliefs, central to civil society, with the concomitant intended social benefits as contrasted with the uncertain social benefits of the quest for positional goods.

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